



# A STUDY OF SKILLS REQUIRED FOR EFFECTIVE DISTANCE LEARNERS FOR QUALITATIVE DISTANCE EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratizing force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances. In the post-take of stage of distance education in India, it has attained tremendous growth in terms of proliferating the educated manpower starting from womenfolk to unemployed youth. The reasons for sending wards to schooling are two folds: gaining knowledge and getting employment. Employability determines the success of the student in Higher education whether he draws higher salary or lower salary, for which everyone has been trying to achieve it. When employment is denied to the educated individual, the duties and responsibilities of the welfare state are at stake.

Education, skill development and employability have to go hand in hand, if the relation between academics and employability has to be sustained. With a view to increasing employability among distance learners, the following strategies may be followed: framing of effective curriculum for the development of professional skills, inter disciplinary approaches, organizing training programmes for skill developments, developing psychomotor skills by making writing assignments compulsory for distance learners, timely correction and feed back to the students, effective students support services, supplementing education through media and academic-industry partnership at higher education level. With the following objectives, the study was carried out: (1) To identify various developmental skills to be used in Distance education; (2) To understand the suitability of distance education courses with regard to the development of employability skills among the distance learners.; (3) To work out the strategies for maintaining Quality Distance Education.

With normative survey method, the study was conducted in consultation with various primary and secondary sources of distance education materials including recently published Education Policy of Open and Distance Learning from MHRD, New Delhi.

**KEY WORDS:** Distance education, employability, strategies, didactic communication, democratization, students support services and productive.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Education, being a catalyst for social and economic development has been imparted through formal and non-formal system. In the past, it was hardly possible to provide formal education to the willing population for various reasons. Distance education (DE) has been emerged as an alternative source of formal education and user friendly to the downtrodden of the society.

The reasons for sending wards to schooling are two folds: gaining knowledge and getting employment. Comparatively, latter is more important than the former, supporting the livelihood of the individual in a society. Employability determines the success of the students in Higher education whether he draws higher salary or lower salary, for which everyone has been trying to achieve it. When employment is denied to the educated individual, the duties and responsibilities of the welfare state are at stake and so are the cases of Higher Educational Institutions. But, does distance education really increase the productivity as well as employability of the students in the job market?

Education, skill development and employability have to go hand in hand if the relation between academics and employability has to be sustained. Skills, knowledge and training are the driving forces of economic growth and social development. Countries with higher and better levels of skills adjust more effectively to the challenges and opportunities of world of works. The concept of training refers to the development of skills and a skill is a well coordinated psychomotor activity. Any training programme is thus concerned with improved ways of doing things, of carrying out various activities in a professional manner.

Distance education Universities (DEU) should not only aim for launching of courses and issuance of degrees to the distance learners but also develop subject specific skills and professional skills, because higher education in India whether regular or distance experiences a large gap that exists between the knowledge acquired during university education and the knowledge most useful in professional life. Attitude awareness, professional skills development, problem solving, analytical learning and soft skills should find a place in distance education curriculum and syllabus, as the role of education and training is considered to be an integral factor for socio-economic development. Investment in distance education should chalk out suitable strategies for increasing employability among the distance learners in India. With a view to increasing employability among distance learners, the following strategies may be followed without any compromise: launching of useful courses for socio-economic development, framing of effective curriculum for the development of professional skills, inter disciplinary approaches, organizing study forums and peer tutoring, making writing assignments compulsory, timely correction and feed back to the students, effective students support service, distance tutoring, supplementing education through media and posting of distance education faculties in distance education universities and

implementation of academic-industry partnership in higher education level..

With the following objectives, the study was carried out:

1. To identify various developmental skills to be used in Distance education
2. To understand the suitability of distance education courses with regard to the development of employability skills among the distance learners.
3. To work out the strategies for maintaining Quality Distance Education

With normative survey method, the study was conducted in consultation with various primary and secondary sources of distance education materials including recently published Education Policy of Open and Distance Learning from MHRD, New Delhi. As an outcome of the study, it is firmly believed that distance learners will be able to attain employable skills by understanding – how to select DE universities and courses, nature of demands of the courses in the society, individual efficiency and suitability for the courses, media and student support Services, interdisciplinary approaches and academic and Industry Partnership.

## 2.ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS:

There was a news article printed on 9th November in The Times of India. It was a summary of the India Labour Report 2007. 90% of employment opportunities require vocational skills but 90% of our college and school output has only bookish knowledge. Failure in quality education, lack of technical and vocational skills and policy blunders make it imperative that our system of education whether F2F mode or distance mode needs a structural change. Very few Indian Universities offer technical courses for plus two turned-outs and graduates, with a view to increasing their professional skills to enhance their employability. There is a difference between 'unemployed' and 'unemployable'. 'Unemployable' means that you have neither the skills nor the attitude to be gainfully employed. 'Unemployed' means that you have the right skill set and the attitude but you are yet to find a job

As our former President of India, Dr. Abdul Kalam highlighted in his discourse: “it is not unemployment that is the major problem; it is the question of unemployment that is the major crisis in this competitive world.” According to NASSCOM-McKinsey report, the Indian Industry will face its biggest challenge ever. A talent shortage of 3.1. million knowledge workers, across industry, by 2010 compounded by the fact that only 25 per cent of fresh engineers; and a mere 10% of fresh graduates are actually employable. This is a very shocking number because there is a huge demand in the industry but a short supply of the skilled manpower. What would be the condition of distance education even the result of regular education is alarming?

Graduates coming out of colleges have academic skills with theoretical back-

ground. Lack of Soft skills and Life skills may hamper their career prospects at the interview stage. In the current environment, soft skills are as important as technical skills

Skill Bridge is programme that aims at making Indian youth employable. The Skills imparted through Skill Bridge will make them confident, and help them face the corporate. It's a comprehensive training with a specific curriculum that includes written and spoken English, business communication, resume writing and interview skills, pronunciation, etiquette and leadership skills. Skill Bridge Programme, Career Cuisine, Learning Management Programme, Soft skills Programmes, Employability Enhancement Programme may be carefully designed and launched for the welfare of the distance learners because

“Education without moral  
Business without ethics  
Science without reasoning  
Religion without spirituality  
Training without skills” is an utter waste.

The following list of skills was circulated among the pre-service and in-service teachers and considerable number of collegiate students with an instruction to make tick marks against the skills they knew from the list.

#### Communication skills:

Conversational skills  
Debating skills  
Interacting skills  
Questioning skills  
Interpersonal skills  
Observational skills  
Soft skills  
Linguistic and non-linguistic skills

#### Study skills:

Reading with understanding  
Reading with Pause  
Fast reading  
Note making and Note taking  
Information transfer  
Reference skills  
Location, identification, condensing and gathering skills  
Psychomotor skills  
Skimming and scanning skills  
Self learning skills  
Self-orientating skills

#### Technology skills:

ICT skills  
Media skills  
Critical and creative skills  
Not taking skills  
Presentation skills  
Journalistic skills  
Research skills  
Lab skills  
Organizational skills  
Orientation skills  
Hardware skills  
Software skills  
Uses related skills

#### Pedagogic skills:

Motivational skills  
Interaction skills  
Micro and macro teaching skills  
Presentation skills  
Writing skills  
Testing skills  
Diagnostic skills  
Logical skills  
Reasoning skills  
Analytical skills  
Reflective skills  
Thinking skills  
Responding skills  
Compeering skills  
Study skills  
Critical and creative skills  
Psychomotor skills  
Managerial skills  
Time management  
Leadership qualities  
Administrative skills  
ICT skills

Designing skills  
Display skills  
Questioning skills  
Decision making skills  
Problem solving skills  
Planning and supervising skills  
Monitoring skills  
Training skills  
Social skills  
Commenting skills  
Organisational skills  
Material production skills

#### Science skills:

Observation skills  
Note making and note taking skills  
Skills for identification of problems  
Problem solving skills  
Lab skills  
Reasoning skills  
Logical skills  
Psychomotor skills  
Process skills  
Awareness skills  
Creative and Critical skills  
Analytical skills  
Research skills  
Operational skills  
Computational skills  
Skills on making scientific exhibits  
Statistical skills

It is understood that 48 percent of the in-service teachers knew some of the skills mentioned in the Pedagogic and communication skills, whereas 23 percent of the pre-service teachers recalled a few of the skills. College students recalled only part of the communication skills. It is wonder that even science teachers were not able to recall the types of skills involved in teaching and learning of sciences.

#### 3. EVOLVING NEW COURSES:

Most of the Indian Universities offer courses in order to cater to the needs of the distance learners such as students, teachers, women, employed and unemployed youth and others to improve their educational qualifications so that they can enhance their livelihood. But it is unfortunate that Universities, existing within the jurisdiction of 40 to 60 Kilo meters, launch same kind of traditional courses. Since there is no chance for specialization of any subjects, teachers and other adults have five M.A. degrees with shallow knowledge. This kind of meaning-less proliferation of knowledge cannot make them employable in the job market. Hence, the following innovative courses may be launched with appropriate curriculum and syllabus in order to cope up with modern trend.

M.A. English Language Teaching  
M.A. Language Studies  
M.A. Language and Cultural Studies  
M.A. Applied Linguistics  
M.A. Computational Linguistics  
M.A. e – Learning  
M.A. Natural Language  
M.A. Outsourcing  
M.A. Career Counselling  
M.A. Communication  
M.A. Communicative English  
M.A. Functional English  
M.A. Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL)  
M.A. Subject Communication  
M.A. Classroom Communication  
M.A. Educational Communication  
M.A. Instructional Design  
M.A. Educational Technology  
M.A. Extension Education  
M.A. Multi-media Education  
M.A. Business Communication  
M.A. Life skills  
M.A. Ethical Studies  
M.A. Broadcasting Studies

The distance education students have to carefully select the courses and universities that minimize the mismatch between the education imparted and the skills developed. The present mismatch results in an employment skill handicap among educated Indians, render them employment deprived (Thomas, 2007). The following will picture the realistic mismatch in the system of education.

- Degree in English without LSRW skills and competencies
- Degree in Law without argumentative skills
- Degree in Journalism without skills of writing attractively and acceptably

- Degree in Catering without preparing food deliciously
- Degree in Management without managerial skills
- Degree in Accountancy and Auditing without knowing taxation
- Degree in Science without knowing types of scientific skills

#### 4. STUDENTS' SUPPORT SERVICES:

Distance learners with a wide variety of backgrounds are isolated from other students, teachers and institutions. In order to remove them from isolation, singular narration of distance education lessons, didactic communication through evaluation of assignments and exchange of feed back, academic meet at the study centres are recommended in the system of distance education. Nevertheless, counseling is important because it is the only way of clarifying needs, reconciling conflicting demands of home and work. It includes informing, advising and counseling, teaching and tutoring. Approximately, 60% of students ask for some counseling supports at some point in their students' career. If improper counseling is offered to distance learners by the untrained local faculty at the study centres, it could be fatal to them. Developmental counseling on pre-entry, entry, course choice, career choice, withdrawal and motivational aspects and problem-solving counseling on institutional, personal, study, assessment and time will help students, unemployed and employed persons to realize the goal of education timely through distance mode. It is a pity that most of the students study courses either through regular or distance mode without knowing career prospects of the particular courses they are pursuing. Since this is the condition of the students, how can they improve their employable skills? Therefore, proper counseling by audio and video cassettes, interactive video-disc and CASAID (Careers Advisory Service Computer Aid can be offered to the distance learners to understand their employable skills and suggest them the ways to acquire them timely before their employment. The Pondicherry Women's Commission, Pondicherry undertook a project designed by Dr.M.Doss, career counsellor and launched a 'Telephone-Mediated Educational Guidance Programme for School and College Students' on 7th January 2010 in order to guide students about courses and career choices. The students and parents are advised to contact the career counsellor in the evening hours from 6.00 to 8.00 P.M. either over the phone or through e-mail. In the case of urgency, parents are encouraged to come to the Commission at any time with prior intimation.

Only a few Universities have placement Cells but there is hardly any Guidance and Counselling Units or Students support services on the premises of the Indian Universities and colleges, actively offering guidance to meet out the academic and non-academic needs of the students.

The various departments in Indian Universities should display course choices available from other universities and career opportunities from various sectors including industries for the students. This could, while seeing it everyday, motivate them properly and perhaps help them sustain it till he achieves his goals of education. He should go in search of other skills which are essential for the problem of survival in the highly competitive world.

#### 5. CREDIBILITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION:

The National Policy on Education (1986) says: "Life long education is a cherished goal of the educational process...opportunities will be provided to the youth, housewives, agricultural and industrial workers and professionals to continue their education of their choices at the pace suited to them. The distance education system has been initiated in order to augment opportunities for higher education. India has one of the largest science qualified manpower but not scientific manpower (Mukhopadhyay,1997). Scientific manpower implies knowledge, skills and scientific attitude. Since globalization as inherently a business connotation, India and other developed countries will face an unequal competition in a competitive global market. In order to counteract these challenges, distance education has to take a lead to create the required knowledge, study skills and dexterity to keep pace with latest advancements in Distance education. Public and employers especially in the corporate sectors should have faith on distance education and the degrees they are awarding. 55 – 60% of the institutions and companies in India discard distance learners for employment on various grounds. Hence, distance education universities should carefully design courses for increasing employability among the distance learners to make the reading public believe that DE is in no way inferior to regular education. If any university takes the following steps to improve quality in DE, it can increase credibility among the employer and the public.

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| 1. Self-study materials written with singular narration, with interspersed questions and self check exercises                               | : Reading skills<br>Note making skills<br>Integrating skills<br>Comprehension skills                     |
| 2. Learning through UGC-Country wide classroom Open Channel, Radio/FM Mode/T.V/Comp. Supplementary and Complementary teaching, using Media. | : Listening skills<br>Note taking skills<br>ICT skills   |
| 3. Writing responses for course Assignments   | : Psychomotor skills<br>Writing skills<br>Integrative skills<br>Intensive reading skills<br>Study skills |

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| 4. Provision of feed back to the students with grades after correcting the assignments.  | : Evaluation skills<br>Diagnostic skills<br>Commenting skills  |
| 5. Didactic communication between the teacher and students while correcting assignments. | : Listening skills<br>Critical listening<br>Interacting skills<br>Writing skills<br>Interpersonal skills           |
| 6. Meeting teachers at the Study/Regional centres  | : Communication skills<br>Soft skills<br>ICT skills<br>Operational skills<br>Research skills<br>Counselling skills |

Indira Gandhi National Open Universities (IGNOU), New Delhi and English and Foreign Languages University (EFL), Hyderabad have been conducting distance education courses for two decades. In the process of studies, the certain academic activities -- writing assignments and scoring pass marks in each assignment, participation in the seminar, taking classes for professional development of the distance learners, uses of study skills including reference skills -- are made compulsory without which one cannot appear for the year-end-examinations. It is a healthy sign that universities like IGNOU and EFL not only develop subject specific skills but also job specific skills in India.

Writing assignments and undertaking project works should be made compulsory for distance learners as those two areas are skill-based: psychomotor skills and research skills. In addition, the distance teachers should not only select assignments from written materials dispatched to them alone; one or two questions from media based from Open Channel or Country wide UGC Classrooms etc. This academic provision will tempt them to listen to media-based lessons for better score through which they are exposed to listening skills, observational skills, organizational skills, note taking skills, writing skills and computational skills. It is believed that communication technologies, coupled with flexible home works in the name of assignments and project works and learning strategies like study skills and study habits will undoubtedly provide solid educational experience to distance learners to multiply their educational skills.

#### 6. INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES FOR INCREASING VOCATIONAL SKILLS:

Employability implies something about the capacity of the graduates to function in a job. This kind of capacity has to be nurtured among the students by introducing innovative curricular process in the form of interdisciplinary approach because the curricular process may facilitate the development of pre-requisite skills for employability appropriate to employment. When students of Tamil literature have exposure to computational linguistics or translation techniques from the department of English and Computer science, by completing 15-20 credits a year, along with regular curriculum, it could be easy for him to acquire a lucrative career in the job market or at least he will work as Freelance translator or a Technical Writer in Software industry till he gets a permanent jobs. If any University with real concern of the welfare of the students, they may go with interdisciplinary approaches. The examples are as follows which are not exhaustive.

*Students of Literature* : Should complete one or two papers in Mass communication/Journalism/Media Studies, by attending classes in the respective departments.(Credit based). Focus on Cultural Anthropology/applied Linguistics.

*Science and Commerce students* : Soft skills and reporting; Presentation and communication techniques, Lab skills scientific skills

*Computer science* : Language and Linguistics, statistics Administrative sections of the University Bio-informatics and Bio-technology units for Data analysis using Data mining tech.

*History and Archeology* : Paper on Preservation from Biology and Chemistry department. Documentation techniques from the Dept of Mass communication & Media studies. Techniques of interpretation and offering Explanation from dept of Humanities.

#### 7. STUDY FORUM AND SELF-HELP GROUPS IN DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR EMPLOYABILITY:

Distance learners with like mindedness may join together to discuss the issues of employability being published in the English dailies especially in The Hindu on Classified Advertisement, advertised on every Wednesday. People with experience of Corporate line write a lot of articles on behavioural pattern of the employees and other issues, and the learner will easily understand the expectation of the employers. The following are the suggested fields in which one can equip himself if sincerely makes use of the expertise available within the reach.

- Paper presentation
- Discussion on Newspaper cuttings

- Mock interviews
- Improving Spoken English with like minded people
- Organising Workshops for Writing Skills
- Oral and Aural skills

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### 8. INDUSTRY-ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP:

Education is a catalyst for all development process, whereas the lack of training opportunities constraints the individual to produce constructive works. Hence, exposure to work-culture should be provided to the students. This could be materialized, when Universities tie-up with local industries and National level laboratories with MoU. Not only does this approach develop confidence and augment employable skills among the youth as well. The following are suggested as a few guidelines for the partnership programme.

*Students of Literature* : Visit to Newspaper industry, Writers Workshops/ Creative Forums/ Visit to Higher Learners' Institute Communication Lab.

*Science students* : Industrial visits/ Project discussion

*Computer science and IT* : Software & Outsourcing units Translation and Computational units Bio-statistics of Medical units Tele-Medical unit Exposure to Banking Technology

*History and Social science* : Museum & Units of Archeology with Live projects Cultural Study Centres

*Commerce and Trade* : Banking sectors/Share Market analysis Exposure to Banking Technology

### 9. CONCLUSION:

Distance education, as an innovative instrument of democratizing education to all sectors of people, has widely recognized as an alternative tool to elevate the downtrodden from lower strata to higher strata by offering equitable education through distance mode. Sri. Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India said: our endeavour is that in India, the poorest, the most backward children receive the best possible education and in this direction today, we are here to take a step forward. The Distance mode will extend educational opportunities to all the concerns of country..." The current concern is to make the distance learners employable by imparting employ-able skills to them for survival purposes. The following strategies may be used to develop educational skills among the distance learners.

- Writing assignments should be made compulsory
- Attending contact seminars periodically with intended purpose
- Undertaking Mini/Main project works
- Media-based assignments should be dictated
- Compulsory papers on Communication and Study skills at UG level.
- Compulsory attendance in Teleconference programmes
- Visiting Study centres/Library/Computer labs
- Posting of Trained faculty on Distance Education at the respective centres
- Implementation of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation in DE system.
- Uses of Media for watching specific lessons and listening to FM mode
- Organising National seminars exclusively for distance learners once a year

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